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ABSTRACT

In a problem-solving approach to study skills, the objective is to solve the problems and internalize the problem-solving attitude through oral languaging or problem-solving episodes. These episodes, or interactions, are the means by which students discover that "reading/learning/study" weaknesses can lend themselves to imaginative problem solving. The teacher acts as a convener to guide students through four levels of analysis. These four levels consist of (1) teaching students to delineate and articulate a general learning problem, (2) defining a student's problem in specific terms, (3) examining the student's intuitive means of handling the problem, and (4) selecting a procedure designed to increase skill while, at the same time, maintaining a compatibility with the student's habitual patterns of behavior and temperament. (MAI)

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A Problem-Solving Approach (PSA) to Study Skills

... a sophisticated teaching strategy for the reading/learning specialist

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The label "study skills" suits a whole array of reading/learning/study requirements. But in practice, only SQ3R, its derivatives and variations tend to be offered. Further, beyond a certain novelty effect, most acknowledged study improvement strategies seem to have relatively little impact on student behavior. This fact indicates a problem. Our understanding of the problem is offered, and an alternate approach to teaching, i.e., fostering improvement of, study skills is proposed. We have called this a 'problem-solving approach' (PSA).

The student of theories of learning will find three currents of research and thinking central to this innovation: that of Bloom and Broder (1950) into the problem-solving processes of college students, that of Donald E. P. Smith as represented in his college reading text, Learning to Learn (1961), and that of Manzo and Sherk (in press) emphasizing "oral languaging" as a prime means to advance "dialectical" (i.e., examining) thinking.

WHAT IS LACKING

Study skills instruction is typically based on imparting information about how to "study" better. The problem with this traditional approach

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is somewhat complex. Several of its facets are considered here. Most obvious is the fact that for improvement of learning to occur, the new skills must be applied. Established habits of learning are not easily altered. To add to the difficulty, standard study techniques can seldom be applied without some altering to the learning situation and the learner. It is unrealistic to assume that students are able to make these adaptations without specific training in that process. The processing skills necessary to internalize, adapt and adopt appropriate study habits are high level problem-solving skills worthy of being taught and trained in themselves.

A second fact that contributes to the difficulty is that increased skill in study is a by-product of increased self-awareness. Before a student can adopt more efficient learning habits, it is often necessary for him to examine how he intuitively deals with learning situations. He needs to evaluate these present habits in terms of where he wants to go. Better study practices then become a way to get there.

Third, traditional study techniques tend to imply a kind of trickery: there is an underlying feeling that an efficient learner shouldn't need to resort to such tactics. This feeling is not entirely unfounded, and so when ignored, it serves to undermine the effectiveness of any approach to improvement of study skills.

The approach proposed is based on a firm reaction to these considerations. As a teaching strategy it is addressed to the internalization of a general system, or approach, which is suitable to a full array of

study/learning needs. The likelihood that better learning habits will be "learned" is felt to be increased when initial credence is given to the things students do intuitively and/or gravitate toward personally. The essential thrust is to treat reading/learning deficits as problems requiring inventive and personalized solutions. Whether practices are refined, adjusted, or abandoned, the student gains practice in seeking more effective ways to deal with real learning situations; and therefore, too, becomes more aware of and responsible for the process of carefully delineating and solving complex problems.

A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH

In a problem-solving approach, the objective is simply to solve problems and internalize the problem-solving attitude. This is done through oral languaging, or problem-solving, episodes. These episodes, or interactions, are the means by which students are led to see that reading/learning/study weaknesses can lend themselves to imaginative problem-solving. The teacher acts as a convener to guide students through several levels of analysis. Following is a brief description of the levels through which a problem-solving episode might progress.

At the first level, teaching consists of helping students to delineate and articulate a general learning problem. Presented is a study problem situation which is likely to evoke problem-solving behaviors. The situation is described in some detail, and the actual problem it involves is stated as precisely as possible.

The second level involves students' particular problems. As students are led to define such problems in specific terms, the general problem may come to be seen in different ways. It may be more a problem for some students than for others.

At the third level, the student considers how he intuitively deals with his particular problem. At this point the discussion resolves around whether there is merit in such intuitive means for coping. Myths and "old saws" related to reading/study are dealt with at this stage. Some are dispelled, some are lent support, and others may come to be seen as negotiable.

The problems expressed and intuitive solutions stated form a platform for the fourth level of analysis. The many procedures that have been designed to increase skill in study may now be drawn upon to solve, or to supplement student solutions to, the study problems. Each is examined in terms of "what questions does it answer?" and thus, "how is it used?" and "what else can you do with it?". As procedures are examined, they are judged on the basis of whether they are compatible with the student's habitual patterns of behavior and temperament. After a student has thoroughly examined the problem and acknowledged his personal strengths and limitations, it may often become necessary to determine what is negotiable and what is not.

At this point, other, creative strategies may appear to be necessary. A student's habitual methods may be very different from the methods he finds he must acquire to succeed. In such cases, intermediate methods

may need to be designed, leading gradually from old learning habits to new.

Subsequent to the problem-solving episode, the plentiful resource of activities, exercises, and tasks designed to provide practice may be tapped.

Teaching via the problem-solving approach is more difficult, though more rewarding. There is no formula to teach by, and no easily definable means of teaching that which is originated as solution or remedy. But guidelines, and a case example can be offered so that movement in the problem-solving direction may be begun.

GUIDING IDEAS

1. In terms of learning potential, nearly everyone has reading/study weaknesses.

2. Even minor reading/study weaknesses can become serious learning handicaps with the passage of time and events.

3. Often times a weakness will be recognized and first described in terms of its attendant circumstances.

4. Close analysis of an apparent weakness will likely reveal its roots in a person's individual learning style and social/emotional needs.

5. Weaknesses should be examined, specifically defined, then treated as problems needing, and amenable to, resolution.

6. A suitable remedy may or may not be available in the form of a basic study technique: These static formulas are seldom suited to particular circumstantial needs.

7. Personal problem-solving is open-ended: An individual may opt to devise a way of compensating for, or even circumventing, a weakness rather than undertaking a more rigorous course of action in the face of what may be more immediately pressing concerns.

8. A continuous trial and error procedure should be encouraged, to underscore the ongoing, dynamic nature of the problem-solving process.

REPRESENTATIONS

Below is a brief scenario to represent the oral languaging interaction in which a teacher and students have thought their way together through a typical problem. It takes place in a freshman college class.

SCENARIO

The discussion topic is spelling, a functional problem. The teacher seeks clarification: "You obviously don't mean that you cannot spell when you say 'I can't spell,' so what then do you mean?" From this question the teacher is able to deduce these points of clarification. Students have spelling problems which are clear as to word types and the situations which tend to aggrevate the problem.

The words which tend to be the most problematic are words which have similarities to like words. which/witch; lose/loose; quite/quiet; too/to/two; stationary/stationery. The "occasion" also prompts errors: during tests, rapid notetaking, and when filling out applications. Each of these is noted to be a mild to intensive anxiety situation. Such situations, it is then deduced, narrow human capability to

simultaneously think and write flawlessly.

Next, an analysis of who spells well and badly is undertaken for its heuristic value in solving student spelling problems. Good spellers tend to be orderly in their penmanship and most all things -- even a bit compulsive, perhaps. Poor spellers tend to be more outspoken, less orderly, and in general, imprecise. It appears that spelling is reflective of a mind set and attitude of accuracy, as much as it is a skill. Thus, learning to spell better would mean learning to exercise precision -- to care more about the details of writing, speaking and doing academics.

Some students would not be willing to enjoin their "self" and personal style simply to spell better. For those students, other remedies are proposed; some circuitous, others compensatory.

1. Suggest multiple choice tests to any teachers who might be so disposed.

2. Fill out applications and such at home, with care, and return them by mail . . . after having re-read them for errors a day later.

3. Carry a pocket dictionary.

4. Practice picturing words in your mind's eye; spelling is a form of visual conditioning: stop and see each part of the word.

5. On occasion ask a friend who spells well to proof what you write. This is flattering to the person asked and not demeaning to you.

6. Make a list of words you tend to misspell most often. You'll find that they are fewer than you first thought, and therefore more able to be learned than you may have first imagined.

OTHER TYPES OF PROBLEMS

All "study" problems are learning disabilities. They tend to weaken students in much more pervasive ways than is first realized by their seeming specificity. Here listed are some additional reading/learning/study problems. Students can be asked to indicate on a one to seven scale their introspective judgments as to the severity of each as a problem to them. By simple count and averaging, it can be determined how problems should be ordered for class discussion and treatment.

On a 1(low) to 7(high) indicate the magnitude of difficulty each of the below areas presents for you.

___ a. notetaking
___ b. memory

vocabulary:

___ c. oral
___ d. literary language
___ e. estoeric/technical terms

writing:

___ f. simple expository
___ g. creative
___ h. under pressure
___ i. spelling
___ j. test-taking
___ k. speaking
___ l. conceptualizing
___ m. organizing
___ n. intergrating, transferring learning
___ o. inferring
___ p. reacting
___ q. seeing and remembering details
___ r. "sitting and doing"

This technique of inventory and teaching of study habits is best suited to the special reading class, one taught by a reading/study/improvement of learning specialist. The PSA is too sophisticated for

the uninitiated. It requires that the teacher draw from a wealth of experience, knowledge and training. There is this irony, however: because the teaching system is based on problem-solving, some especially talented content class teachers may be able to employ the same approach. If they are able to internalize the mind set, and tend themselves to be introspective, they may be able to draw-out some very powerful thoughts and suggestions without the benefit of extensive training in reading/study. Logically, the quality of the remedies discovered, and the strength of the commitments to assist in implementing them would be weaker in the mixed agenda of the content class. All of which suggests the importance of a sound partnership between the improvement of learning specialist and the content specialist. The reading/learning specialist could work toward delineating and correcting individual student study deficits while the content teacher could brace-up those efforts with some of her own thoughts as well as with some of the more traditional content area reading strategies.

PSA Extended to Consultation

One excellent model for such partnership exists here at UMKC. Members of the Learning Resources staff, part of the Student Services division, meet with students immediately following a content class, which the specialist has attended. They compare their notes and learnings with hers. She in turn meets with the professor for clarifications and to urge certain tacts which might alleviate certain recurring learning problems. The professor and specialist often engage

in a problem-solving interaction toward improving instruction which is comparable to the kind she might conduct with an "Improvement of Learning" class. Thus, the PSA, and accompanying guidelines, can serve as a model for consultation as well. Substitution of the words "teaching-learning weaknesses" for "reading-study weakness" will make the guidelines appear more appropriate to this possibility.

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